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Spotlight on Yeronga State School

Education Queensland

Nurturing Needs: Literacy Achievement for Refugee students

Carla Walker, Deputy Principal, talks with ALEA Queensland State Director, Beryl Exley

Spotlight on the demographics

Yeronga State School, located 7 km from the city in Brisbane, Queensland, opened in 1871. YSS caters for a middle class inner-suburban community, however, from the mid 1990s enrolments brought new forms of socio-economic, cultural and linguistic diversity. Initially, ESL students were enrolled due to their immigrant parents enrolling in the neighbouring TAFE. Then refugee families from Bosnia and the Middle East became part of the YSS community. In recent years, refugee numbers have accounted for up to 23% of the school population. Many of these new arrivals left behind families in war-torn circumstances, were orphaned or came to live with unknown relatives. Some family members were victims of torture which may have been witnessed by the children. Trauma for some or all family members was a very real concern. Others were born in refugee camps, where food was scarce, belongings needed to be guarded and safety was never guaranteed.

Forms of Diversity	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
No of countries of birth other than Australia	35	34	32	37	43	46	48	43	45
No of languages spoken in home other than English	32	32	32	35	39	48	51	44	49
No of suburbs YSS students travel from	49	51	51	49	49	49	49	42	38

YSS's successes can be measured through the changes of individual and group behaviour, community involvement, academic results and increases in cultural and religious acceptance by the mainstream. Taking refugees from 'seeking to survive' to actively contributing to a mainstream's deep and respectful understandings of culture and identity is a hallmark of success in a nation attempting to construct itself as a functional multi-cultural community.

Spotlight on Teaching Excellence

Despite the diversity of population, YSS has achieved excellence with high quality outcomes for all students. Learning English was the common skill required for refugee students to access education, but for many, no experience in any educational setting with any written language impacted on progress. YSS's academic programs included intensive English teaching, basic functional language, verbal and non-verbal

cues and use of appropriate syntax. Inclusion in the school's metalinguistic awareness programs and the establishment of early literacy skills, reading skills and spelling strategies gave the refugee students an individualised program. The school-based programs developed by teaching staff are framed by inquiry-based projects with explicit teaching of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Simple, but highly effective writing programs, a focus on mathematical terminology and operations and the language of problem solving and basic computer skills were important for older students preparing for high school. YSS has achieved something significant. Their NAPLAN results (which include all refugee students except new arrivals) show over 80% and in some case 100% of students over National Benchmarks. The following table summarises the reading outcomes for the refugee students over a two and three year span.

Year Level	Number of refugee students	Refugee students reading independently after 2 years at YSS	Refugee students' Dolch word knowledge after 2 years	Refugee students reading independently after 3 years at YSS
4	11	3 (27%)	8	4 (36%)
5	12	7 (58%)	9	8 (66%)
6	13	4 (30%)	9	5 (38%)
7	10	3 (30%)	9	7 (70%)

Spotlight on 'Nurturing the Needs' of the extended YSS community

The underlying premise of the YSS program was to attend to the students' basic social and emotional needs so that academic development can follow. Thus practical support was offered in the form of:

- donations of toys, clothing, stationery items and books
- food bank for lunches (extra lunches made by parents so children could share with new refugee friends)
- nutrition sessions for refugee parents with Multicultural Community Centre (supermarket etiquette, food shopping, reading labels, healthy eating, cooking demonstrations)
- donations of basic hygiene products and explanations on how to use them
- "Flip Side" circus workshops for refugee students (improve self esteem) and then some students perform in school and local community events <http://www.flipsidecircus.org.au/>
- "Rock and Water" program with QPASTT (skills for physical and social teaching) <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/research-centre/fac/workshops/rock-and-water/workshop-dates.html>
- "Rainbow Program" (program for girls in refugee families) used to decrease anxiety and promote self-esteem <http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/programs-guide/rainbow-refugee>

An added consideration was that some of these refugee students had no experience in an educational setting, so the following activities were offered:

- modelling and role plays to give examples of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour without the need of English language knowledge
- Teacher-aides in playground to initiate play for children
- 'Play Partners' (older students modelling play and organising games with simple rules)
- 'Buddy system' between new students and existing students
- celebrating with 'Playground awards' for fair play.

To better understand how YSS could attend to the students' needs, professional development was provided to all staff on:

- the political histories of the various countries and cultural knowledge from the various groups of people (bust the myth of over-generalisations and stereotypes)
- the politics of 'Camp culture' and 'Camp lore' e.g. "What I find is mine, and what I can get is mine"
- building productive relationships with agencies so networks could all work together for the betterment of all.

Working with parents/carers who were not print-literate in their first language or in English meant a review of school-home-community communications. Consequently, YSS:

- sourced bilingual support personnel to communicate with parents/carers and assist in conflict resolution and gender equity issues
- used video footage in parent/carer meetings to show students' growth and development over a period of time
- built networks with the refugee parent/carer group by networking with African elders and community leaders
- used established parents/carers of the same cultural group as "buddies" to help support the new arrival families, meeting them at the school, passing on information and advice
- communicated via phone rather than written messages
- held morning tea meetings (with an interpreter present) to discuss school life, children's education and social competencies and to introduce parents/carers to one another
- hosted celebratory afternoon teas to showcase children's work and encourage homework task completion
- accessed resources such as "Every Child is Important" in multiple languages from the Australian Childhood Foundation website
<http://www.kidscount.com.au/english/default.asp>
- organised orientation walks at the end of Year 7 to familiarise refugee students with the layout and timetabling changes in a secondary school context.



The effects of the above implementation were tangible. Teachers reported:

- significant increases in refugee students' positiveness to school work
- refugee students' increased understanding of school routines and expectations
- refugee students' increased social skills, school etiquette and socially accepted ways of communicating in the school setting eg. playground behaviours and knowledge of conventions of play and games
- refugee student attendance increased close to 100% as students felt part of the school and its community
- increased nutritional knowledge and the development of good eating and hygiene habits.

Spotlight on Diversity in the Curriculum

The challenge was to cater for the growing socio-economic, cultural and linguistic changes and embracing diversity as a resource while avoiding the creation of a divide in the school culture. YSS avoided isolating the refugee students away from the mainstream, believing better outcomes could be achieved for everyone through integration. The teachers publicly recognised the new learning opportunities the refugee students brought to the mainstream. YSS has successfully maintained the academic results of the mainstream as well as deepened everyone's understandings and appreciation of diversity. Recognition of the refugees' experiences, resilience and differences in culture and religion created situations to assist them to adapt and be included in the Australian culture and from there, return something of value to the mainstream. These outcomes were achieved by focusing on ways the refugee students could engage with and contribution to the curriculum content without an immediate need for English.

Music

- introduce African drumming for all students
- making traditional African drums with a professional drum maker
- invited to join with Marimba Band for the Brisbane Festive “Into Africa”
- choir was part of the fundraising CD for “Kidzkidz” to support education in Iraq

Sport

- involvement in District and Regional teams through funding provided by P & C, fundraising and service organisation donations
- Police liaison officer for Multicultural relations worked with students on soccer rules and encouraged participation in soccer activity outside school
- partnership with Brisbane Roar (soccer) in association with Brisbane City Council, which lead to workshops for all interested students. Students played demonstration game at Suncorp Stadium before Roar game.

Art

- art therapy classes by artists with particular skills in the area
- art show to celebrate and show art works to parents and whole school.

Gardening

- gardening project – growing vegetables known to the children and ones new to them
- cooking sessions with produce grown at the school
- producing a recipe book from the different cultures using produce items from the garden



Spotlight on the Outcomes

Sharing and celebration of achievement are an integral part of school life at YSS. Special occasions were created to “show off” the achievements to the whole school community and the proud parents/carers. The families had a reason to celebrate *with* the school community.

The **Outcomes** were [a] sharing two ways, for example, drumming and African drum making became part of the whole school program into the music program; [b] mainstream community learnt tolerance, understanding, compassion and that children are ‘more similar than different’; [c] in the past 4 years, students from refugee backgrounds have been elected by the students and teachers into leadership roles (eg. three as sports captains and one student councillor) , [d] sharing in sporting successes of the school as refugees make up 75% of Team Yeronga.